ROGUE LEADERS

Exclusive Preview for PC Gamer readers! CHAPTER EXCERPT + SPECIAL OFFER

THE STORY OF LUCASARTS

BY ROB SMITH • FOREWORD BY GEORGE LUCAS

CHAPTER THREE

BIRTH OF THE CLASSICS

1990-1993

As Lucasfilm Games ramped up its operation with additional talent, learning the proprietary SCUMM language involved graduating from SCUMM-U—the training university in which new designers enrolled to become familiar with the toolset. Students at SCUMM-U were labeled "Scummlets."

Full Throttle designer Tim Schafer and Day of the Tentacle co-creator Dave Grossman were two of the first students and graduates. (The dubious honor of being referred to as a Scummlet was dropped only after becoming a Project Leader.) The initial training lasted a month, after which each Scummlet was required to create a mini-game using the tools they had learned, and then swap games to fix problems they discovered in the scripting system.

"It was probably the greatest job ever," Schafer says of this time. "No one in history has ever had a better time than being a Scummlet at Skywalker Ranch in 1989. We were very proud of the name 'Scummlet' and didn't even think of trying to lose it." Working with SCUMM still presented its challenges, though. Besides being functional and effective, it was, as Grossman describes, "a slightly leaky but astonishingly useful tool for making graphics adventures. We were the guinea pigs, along with two others, Jen Sward and Ron Baldwin."

At the time, none of the designers or programmers using the SCUMM engine were cognizant that the gameplay methods crafted using this toolset would help establish rules and mechanics for the adventure genre that competitors would try to emulate. "Our goal was to do truly innovative games," designer Ron

Gilbert recalls. "We still had pressure from Lucasfilm not to waste money—we were far from an ivory tower—but a vibe ran through the company that we always had to be the best."

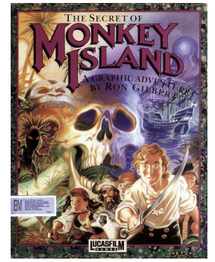
In that spirit, development began on The Secret of Monkey Island (1990). For as long as history records the greatest moments in PC gaming, a special place will be reserved for Gilbert's seminal adventure game. Using a maturing SCUMM engine—plus the design and writing input of Schafer and Grossman—the original Monkey Island earned rave reviews upon its initial launch on the Amiga. Subsequent PC releases expanded the game's limited 16-color palette to an enhanced 256 colors, and then allowed full audio integration when Secret was released on CD-ROM. All the while, the game's reputation endured—and grew.

Writing consistently funny, high-quality comedy is supremely challenging, but the talented team executed it with distinction. The adventure story, its style, and its memorable situations immediately struck a chord with gamers. Wannabe-pirate Guybrush Threepwood stumbled into the gaming spotlight as the hero of Monkey Island, ingratiating his carefully crafted demeanor into the consciousness of every player who followed his exploits.

"The pirate theme came from one place: I hated fantasy"

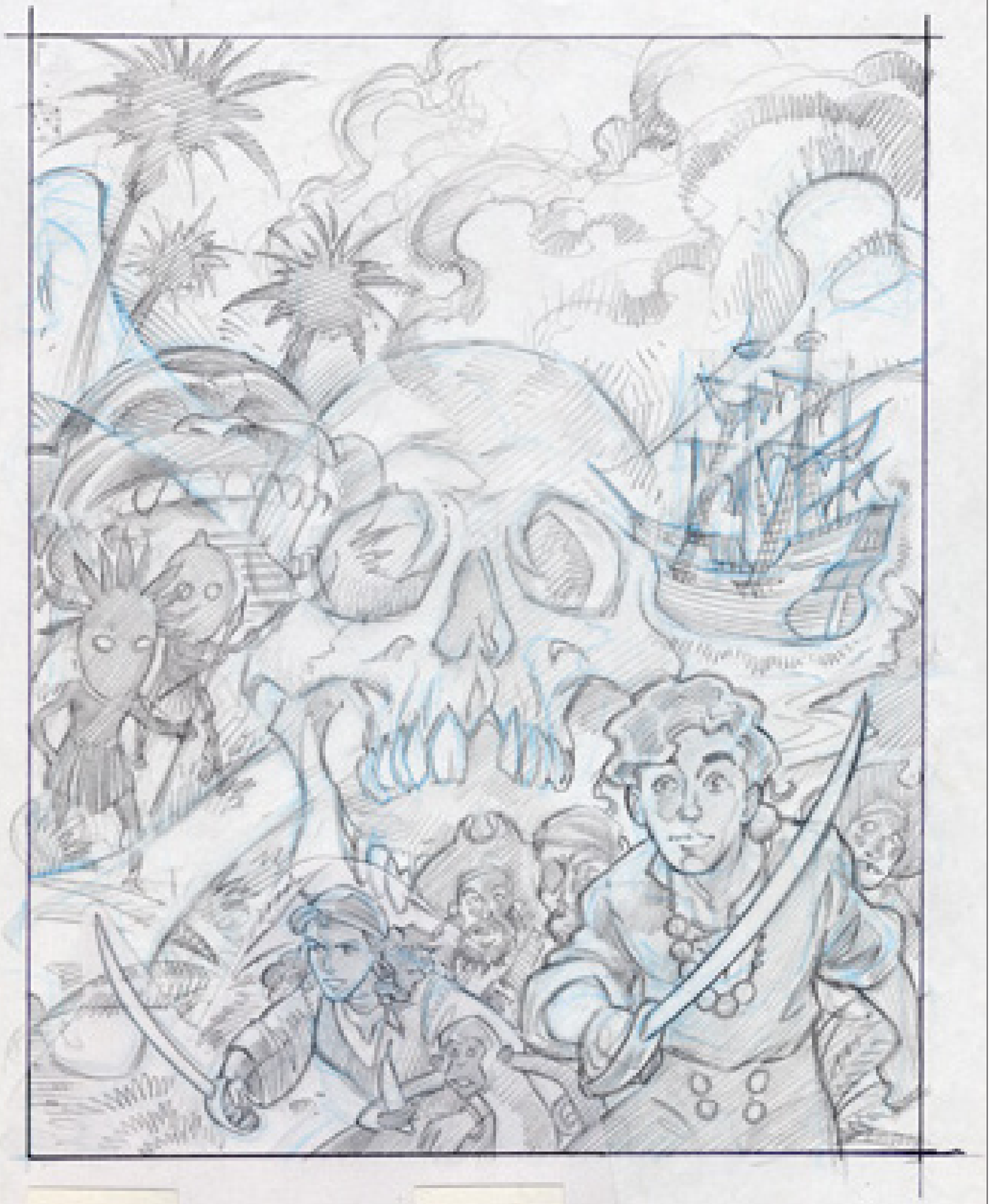
– Ron Gilbert

"The pirate theme came from one place: I hated fantasy," explains Gilbert.



Top: Watercolor for a Secret of Monkey Island activity poster, by Steve Purcell

Above: [box art looks low res – new option attached] Box art for the adventure game that became a legend, The Secret of Monkey Island (1990).



Fantasy had emerged as a popular genre for gamers. Tabletop role-playing games such as TSR's Dungeons & Dragons, Chaosium's Runeq uest, and Iron Crown Enterprises' Middle-Earth Roleplaying Game were popular with a demographic that was shifting its attention from pen-and-paper to computers. For potential newcomers to a game setting, fantasy was also fairly easy to explain: little background reading is required to know that Orcs are green-skinned bad guys, elves are pointy-eared high-minded guys, and dwarves are bearded miners. Space-based settings present the challenge of having to explain the fiction and technology at work in the gameworld. But the pirate theme had the potential to attract a number of fantasy fans who wanted something a little different.

"Once that idea hit me, the Pirates [of the Caribbean] ride at Disneyland was a natural since I loved it so much," recalls Gilbert. " I also read a book called *On Stranger Tides* [a pirate fantasy novel written by Tim Powers, published in 1988] that solidified much of my thinking about the story."

Guybrush's quest to become a pirate, his meeting with love interest Elaine, and the conflict that emerges with ghost pirate LeChuck are all part of PC-gaming lore. Its humor, puzzles, and loveable characterizations were popular among players, and numerous websites delved deep into the origins of every design decision. With the game consistently appearing on Best of PC Gaming lists, its principle designers are frequently asked "What is the Secret of Monkey Island?"—a question they refuse to answer for fear of the monkeys.

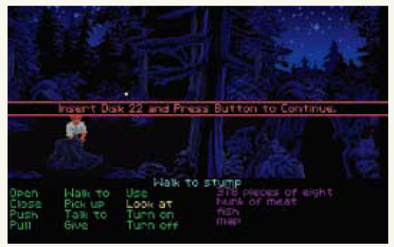
Famed science-fiction author Orson Scott Card was involved in the writing for The Secret of Monkey Island, creating the dialogue for most of the insults flung to and fro in the swordfights.

Opposite page: Pencil sketch for the Secret of Monkey Island cover painting, by Steve Purcell

Above: The Secret of Monkey Island was released in different formats, taking advantage of the PC's VGA graphics for gamers who had that processing power, but still using the SCUMM engine to streamline its adventure gameplay.

Top: Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge (1991) was released just a year after the original game, and built on the growing legend of Guybrush Threepwood.

Above: Screenshot of Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge showing Guybrush Threepwood in a spitting contest



The "Secret" of Monkey Island

Ron Gilbert's favorite joke in The Secret of Monkey Island is the Stump Puzzle. Look at a tree stump and you're asked to insert disk #22. Of course, there is no disk 22, so tech support was driven crazy by the volume of calls from gamers complaining that their game box didn't contain a disk 22. The "joke" was that the secret tree stump area simply did not exist, and gamers could spend hours at the puzzle for what amounted to… nothing. Future Monkey Island games also reference the joke, although it was removed from the CD version.

MONKEY ISLAND 2: LECHUCK'S REVENGE

In just a year the team was able to get a sequel, Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge (1991), onto store shelves. It seems like an almost impossible feat to modern game production teams, but it was common—relatively straightforward, even—for the team at Lucasfilm Games (which had become a division under the newly formed LucasArts Entertainment Company in 1990 alongside ILM and others), who were increasingly well-practiced with the SCUMM toolset.

"A graphics adventure was more like puppet theater than a film-quality cinematic extravaganza, and the story and puzzles required far fewer resources to implement," recalls designer Dave Grossman.

The first two Monkey Island games were incredibly detailed and creative, yet, from a technology standpoint, they weren't particularly complex. Thus, the developers could quickly test great new ideas for dialogue, situations, or even puzzles right up to within a couple of hours before the game needed to ship. Manpower resources were similarly tight, as the designers worked in small groups—bouncing ideas, puzzle concepts, and story features off each other. As you might imagine, packing the creative talent required to produce games of such quick wit into one small room had benefits… and challenges. "Those sessions often became hilarious enough to be dangerous, with me asthmatically coughing up my own brain from laughing too much," recalls Grossman.

The artists for the project were located on a different floor from the designers, requiring frequent trips to see what they had produced. Though Monkey Island 2 was slightly larger in scope, the team was about the same size as the original team, with the addition of one scripter and a couple of artists. The game did introduce a technological change: for the first time, the background art was drawn by hand on paper, then scanned into a computer, rather than being drawn directly on a computer using the available tools. Grossman recalls their scanner costing as much as a car, which meant the scanning of his own photographs to turn into desktop wallpaper had to be done after-hours. This new technology did, however, allow the artists to craft significantly more detailed new scenes that could now be simply merged into the game environment.

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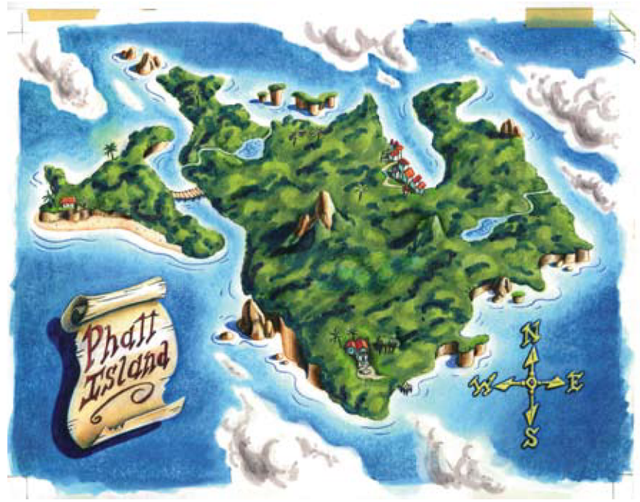
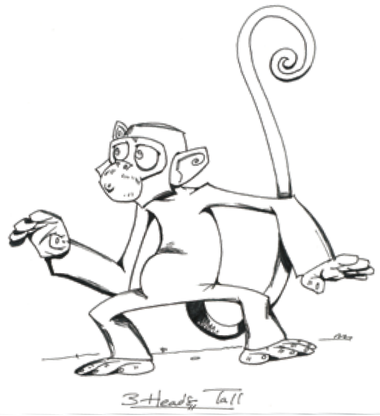
Left: Codewheels for The Secret of Monkey Island (top) and Monkey Island 2 (bottom) revealed codes meant to thwart software piracy.

Dave Grossman claims that he was at Lucasfilm Games (and then LucasArts) longer than Tim Schafer: "I got there a little early on the first day, and the person I was supposed to meet hadn't shown up yet, so I took a stroll around the building, during which time Tim Schafer arrived–it was also his first day. Eighteen years later, we still argue about which of us came to Lucas first. But it was me, by several minutes."

Pages 52–53: A test background painted in gouache, by Steve Purcell, circa 1990. "In The Secret of Monkey Island, we started with 16 colors. For LeChuck's Revenge, we had all the colors we needed," says Purcell.





Above: Box art for the PC release of Monkey Island 2 (1991)

Top, left: Concept art of Phatt Island (by Sean Turner, circa 1990), which appears in Monkey Island 2

Top, right: Pencil sketch of monkey from Monkey Island 2 (artist unknown)

Opposite: Concept art for Monkey Island 2 packaging, by Steve Purcell

Now better-versed with the tools, the team focused on tweaking gameplay and evolving the quirky characters. In the sequel, Guybrush's focus turned to recovering the treasure Big Whoop and rekindling the romantic spark with Elaine. Meanwhile, the addition of a new difficulty setting meant that gamers could make it easier to solve the puzzles successfully: An option dubbed "Monkey Island Lite" limited a few choices, but was the first time a company had managed to make an adventure game easier for a more casual audience. The success of the original Monkey Island kept a hardcore gaming audience eager for more challenges, but this new feature made the series less daunting for newcomers. In addition, Monkey Island 2 was the first commercial airing of Michael Land's iMUSE sound engine (see sidebar page 65), which contributed to the game's impressive critical reception. But still. . . nobody knew the secret of Monkey Island.

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Tim Schafer's Job Interview

David Fox was director of operations when Tim Schafer applied for a job at Lucasfilm Games. Fox recalls that Schafer's résumé stood out from the pile of others in front of him. Rather than trot out the usual list of previous jobs and experience, Schafer's CV was a hand-drawn cartoon telling the tale of him being chosen for the job, illustrating just how happy he would be. Because the company wasn't necessarily looking for game programmers—thanks to SCUMM-U, the consensus was that these skills were teachable—humor and creativity were far more valuable commodities.

Tim Schafer recalls the application process: "I had a normal résumé at first, but then I blew the phone interview. David asked if I had played any Lucas games, and I said: 'Of course! I love them all! My favorite one was Ballblaster!'

"'Ballblaster, eh?' he said.

"'Yeah, I loved that game!'

"'Well, I think you meant to say Ballblazer. Ballblaster was what they called the pirated version.'

"Whoops! I had, in fact, pirated the game. And now he knew that. And it might have cost me my dream job. Let that be a lesson to you, kids! Don't pirate games!

"But still, he said, 'Well, why don't you send in your résumé, and a cover letter describing your ideal job.'

"I figured I had blown the interview already, so I had nothing to lose. So I made a cover letter in the form of a text adventure, with little graphic slides on the side. I drew all the graphics on my Atari 800 with a Koala Pad."

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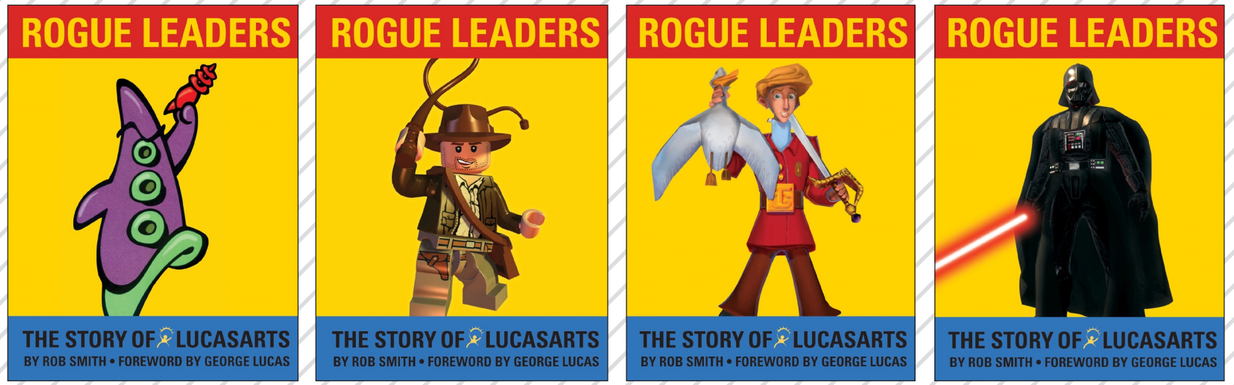

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